DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 120 CG 013 563

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TITLE Old and Alone.
INSTITUTION Rand Corp., Santa Monica, Calif.
PUB DATE Nov 78
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Coping; *Emotional Adjustment; Females; Males; *Marital Status; *Older Adults; *Personal Adjustment; Psychological Needs; Research Projects; *Sex Differences

ABSTRACT

A common assumption, reflective of data obtained from older males, often in institutional or outpatient settings, is that being old and alone is a severely negative condition. A sample of 300 older men and women in community settings provides an alternative perspective. For a number of daily living activities as well as personal and interpersonal attitudes and orientations, comparisons between older adults currently living with spouse and those alone make it apparent that sex of the subject importantly affects outcome. For older women in the lone status, life is far from unpleasant--in fact, they fare better not only than their single male counterparts but also than still-coupled women of comparable age. For men, on the other hand, the stereotypic views seem to have more substance. Results are interpreted in the light of previous history of traditional role enactment and its differential impact during aging for men and women. (Author)

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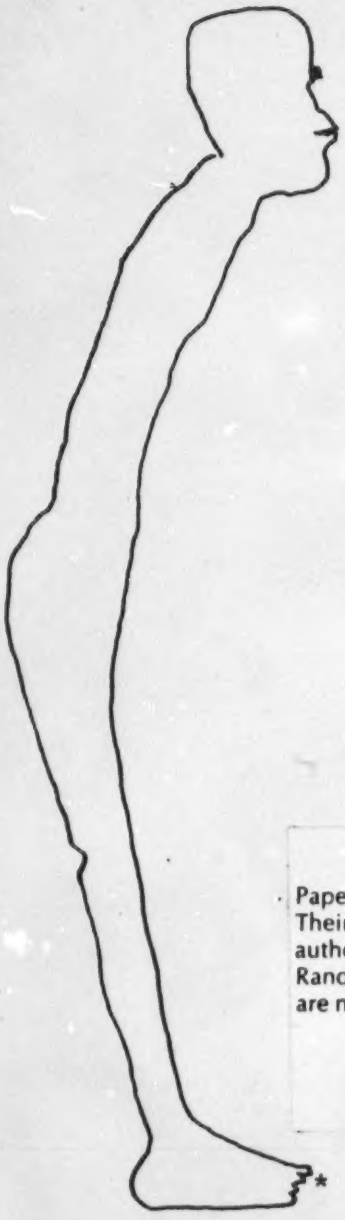

OLD AND ALONE

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A Paper For The

SYMPOSIUM

Family Patterns: Social Myth and Social Policy

presented at the meeting of
The American Psychological Association,
Toronto, August 1978.

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*Drawing by 70 year old widowed man.

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ABSTRACT

APA Symposium, "Family Patterns: Social Myths and Social Policy"

OLD AND ALONE

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and

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A common assumption based on previous research is that being old and alone is a severely negative condition. However, this conclusion reflects a data base primarily obtained from older adult males, often in either institutional or outpatient settings. The present research, based on sample of over 300 older men and women recruited in community settings, provides an alternative perspective.

For a number of dimensions of daily living activities as well as personal and interpersonal attitudes and orientations, comparisons between older adults currently living with a spouse and those living alone make it apparent that sex of the subject importantly affects outcome. It seems to be consistently true that for older women in the lone status, life is far from unpleasant--in fact, on many measures they fare better not only than their single male counterparts but also than still-coupled women of comparable age. For men, on the other hand, the stereotypic views seem to have more substance.

These results are interpreted in the light of previous history of traditional role enactment and its differential impact during aging for men and women. Understanding what it means to be old and alone, as well as the factors that ameliorate or impair that status, is increasing in importance given the expected growth in the proportion of single older persons consequent on decreasing size of families and changing life styles.

INTRODUCTION

Currently there are approximately 23 million individuals over age 65 in the U.S. population, a figure that represents more than 11 percent of the total. Moreover, while the number of individuals in the older adult age group is expected to increase by a third during the remaining two decades in this century, their proportion is expected to increase even more substantially. These expected changes in age group distribution in the general population reflect stable long-term trends toward lower birth rates and greater longevity which are well established in research literature (see, for example, Shanus and Hauser, 1974). Less research attention, however, has been given to the expected living situation of growing numbers of older adults.

Living Situation

Concurrent with increases in the proportion of older adults in the population are rapid increases in the number of individuals in that age group who are single, primarily because the older female population is increasing faster than the population of older males (Butler, 1978). For young-old adults (i.e., those in their late sixties and early seventies) the ratio of women to men is about 125 to 100; for old-old adults the ratio is about 200 to 100 and the discrepancy is projected to increase. Further, the remarriage rate for older adult men is 20 per 100 while for women it is 5 per 100. Thus in 1976 there were five times as many widows as widowers (Glick, 1977). Being old and single, then, is typically associated with being female.

In addition, being old and single is associated with small household size. Fully 90 percent of all older adults live in one- or two-person households, with both sex and age having a strong impact on living situation. That is, among men 75 percent of the young-old and 33 percent of the old-old live with a spouse. In contrast, among women 50 percent of the young-old and only 8 percent of the old-old live with a spouse. The others typically live alone in one-person households, so that older adults alone currently comprise 70 percent of all adults not-in-families (Glick, 1977). While living alone is a rapidly growing life style among younger as well as older adults, the years since

1970 have produced an especially dramatic increase in the proportion of older women alone. Among the reasons for the prevalence of this living situation are greater economic independence and improved health which enable current cohorts of older adults to maintain individual households. Assuming that the trends summarized here continue, then, the old and alone status is one which will be occupied by larger and larger numbers of adults, and especially by older women.

Myth versus Reality

In light of its growing importance in the population, the status of being old and alone merits serious research attention. Most commonly that status is regarded as a severely negative one for several reasons. First, it is believed that older adults alone typically do not belong to organizations, do not participate in available social activities, and do not seek social support. Second, it is thought that a significant proportion of these individuals are isolated from relatives and friends, so that informal interpersonal contact is infrequent as well. Finally, it is often assumed that friendships among older adults are not close, complex, nor emotionally involved. These views create an almost Hobbesian picture of the status of older adults--their life is seen as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish," and *long*. Moreover the situation is said to be especially adverse for women and for the urban low-income aged.

These views, we believe, have shaped research and policy in aging although evidence is becoming available which suggests that they may be "mythic" in the sense in which Baltes and Schaie (1976) use that term. That is to say, while these views undoubtedly have some basis in reality and may be wholly characteristic of some segments of the older adult population, it is unlikely that they represent the modal case. An alternative perspective is provided, for example, in the work of Cantor (1975), who finds rich, active inner-city neighborhood networks. Over 80 percent of Cantor's sample of older adults socialize on steps, benches, in parks and other open spaces, and many eat together. Further, two-thirds of the inner-city aged had at least monthly contact with relatives. Similar data come from Cohen and Sokolovsky's

(1977) investigation of 11 midtown Manhattan single-room-occupant (SRO) dwellings, which established viable, complex social networks among residents. Network membership ranged from 0 to 26, with a mean of 7.5; over 70 percent of SRO residents had a social network including at least five members. In addition, studies by Shapiro (1971), Siegel (1974), and others have provided evidence of significant emotional relatedness in the social world of inner-city older adults. Last, recent studies of loneliness (Perlman, 1978; Sermat, 1978) suggest that among older adults widowers may be significantly more lonely than married men, but women alone do not differ from married women in this regard. Although these results are only preliminary, they point to the inadvisability of drawing overly general conclusions about the old and alone status.

Given the increasing social importance of the old and alone status and the lack of consistent broadly based information about it, it seemed worthwhile to us to examine an existing dataset obtained from older adults in greater Los Angeles community settings. Within that dataset we explored variables likely to shed light on the life situation of older adults alone.

METHOD

The data presented here were collected as part of a larger study of product decisionmaking among older adults (Bikson and Goodchilds 1978).[1] While the proliferation of products and information about products has created difficult and important decision problems across population groups, in our view older adults merited special attention for several reasons. First, cognitive limitations often attributed to aging (e.g., slower information processing) could aggravate the difficulty of managing extensive arrays of product information. Second, social and situational variables thought to influence the character of

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[1] *Product Decision Processes Among Older Adults*, Tora K. Bikson and Jacqueline D. Goodchilds, Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation, R-2361-NSF, September 1978. (This research was supported by funds from the National Science Foundation under Grant No. APR75-20134.)

decisionmaking define the elderly as a group at risk. For instance, health constraints associated with age increase the importance of making "good" choices, while income constraints render each purchase decision more consequential. Such factors as sex, household size, and social role are also likely to affect decisionmaking; however, these variables have received little research attention in studies of cognition and aging. In fact, many such studies have relied exclusively on male subjects in institutionalized or outpatient settings.

Procedure. We undertook to study decisionmaking within an everyday context (food selection) using frequently-purchased grocery products as stimuli. After performing a series of decision tasks culminating in a preferential ordering of stimulus products, subjects were asked to answer a number of demographic and related social-situational questions. Those that finished in less than the allotted time were given the option of responding to an additional set of questions tapping a variety of self and social attitudes. Responses were expected to shed light on the ways in which variables exogeneous to cognitive processing per se can influence decision outcomes. But responses were even more interesting in their own right for the light they shed on the status of older adults alone.

Subjects. All participants were residents of Los Angeles, living in private households, and regularly shopping for food in markets. Recent SMSA census data determined the initial recruiting plan, intended roughly to match, on demographic selection variables, the actual target population: older adults who are functioning in the community and able to read and respond to experimental materials, and a comparison group of young adults whose living situation is relatively similar. Thus, in addition to age, the variables sex and living situation were included in sample stratification to insure representation of major categories of the older population. (To simplify an already complex sampling task we eliminated from analyses the data from nonwhite participants, and the recruiting setting largely eliminated the very wealthy and the very poor.)

The older subjects were contacted and the research procedures were conducted at sites where National Nutrition Programs for the

Elderly, funded through OAA Title VII, provide low-cost meals. These programs are located primarily in small city parks, Senior Citizens' Centers, and church or club halls. The comparison group of young adults was obtained at an office of the California State Employment Service, where the procedures were conducted; as persons surviving on unemployment, younger subjects were similar in income terms to the older group. Each subject was paid $5 to take part in one 1 1/2-hour group session, usually with four to six others of the same age. Table 1 presents the attained sample.

Table 1

ATTAINED SAMPLE

Household Size	Young Mean Age=30	Young-Old Mean Age=70	Old-Old Mean Age=80	TOTALS
1-Person:				
Man	70	57	41	168
Woman	47	89	46	182
2-Person:				
Man with Spouse	42	40	--	82
Woman with Spouse	40	63	--	103
TOTALS	199	249	87	535

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data were examined primarily by analyses of variance, treating age, sex, and household size as independent factors. For the present purposes, we are interested in examining responses provided by the Young-Old group (aged 65-74), making comparisons with the Young (aged 25-35) and the Old-Old (aged 75 and older) where they are enlightening. Unless otherwise labeled, tables provide information from Young-Old respondents only. After demographic indices are presented, more detailed attention is given to social and situational variables reflecting the status of older men and women alone. Finally, data are presented for a few items from the optional questionnaires. While this

subsample is small (n=80) and in some ways unrepresentative, obtained responses are especially relevant to understanding the old and alone status.

Demographic Information

Demographic variables examined include education, occupation, and financial status indicators. With respect to formal education, our older adult sample had received slightly more schooling than had been expected on the basis of 1970 SMSA census means for their age group; nearly half had completed high school. Table 2 presents data by sex and household size for the young-old group.

Table 2

FORMAL EDUCATION[a]

	Alone	With Spouse	MEAN
Men	1.35	1.63	1.49
Women	1.50	1.35	1.43
MEAN	1.43	1.49	1.46

[a]1=through high school; 2=beyond high school.

As Table 2 suggests, women alone are better educated than either men alone or still married women; the sex-by-household interaction term is highly significant ($F = 9.79$, $p<.002$). It should be noted that among the old-old sample, all of whom lived alone, the same sex difference appears. The same trend appears in the younger sample, but the difference in attained education level for men and women is not significant.

In regard to subjects' occupations, we expected that a large percentage of the older women would not have been employed as adults. However, less than 15 percent of women over age 65 in our sample reported never having worked outside the home, a figure which probably reflects the fact that this group was of working age during the "full employment" years of World War II. On the other hand, most of these

women were never heads of household, and it is likely that they were "underemployed" relative to men of similar education levels. Occupation data are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

OCCUPATION[a]

	Alone	With Spouse	MEAN
Men	2.64	1.58	2.11
Women	2.31	2.13	2.21
MEAN	2.48	1.86	2.16

[a](What work did you do for most of your working years?) 1 = professional, managerial; 2 = sales, clerical; 3 = craftsmen, operatives; 4 = laborers; 5 = unemployed.

Analysis of these data yielded a main effect for household size ($F = 8.26$, $P<.005$), subjects with spouses reporting higher levels of occupation. The sex-by-household interaction term was also significant ($F = 4.39$, $P<.04$), representing the employment position of married men. Among married older adults, men report the higher occupation levels; among those alone, in contrast, women report higher levels.

The last demographic variable investigated was financial status, operationalized in a number of ways. For example, we asked subjects to record their best (remembered) annual household income. However, we learned that many older women had not known what their household earnings were while they were married; for many of them, in fact, the monthly social security check was the first income of their very own which they had ever managed. In general, it proved difficult to arrive at a good indicator of the socioeconomic status of older adults, and particularly of older women. We decided, for purposes of the research project, to index SES primarily in terms of two variables, present monthly income and how that income is perceived. Data collected from respondents relative to these two variables appear in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4

PRESENT MONTHLY INCOME[a]

	Alone	With Spouse	MEAN
Men	2.19	1.35	1.77
Women	1.89	1.56	1.72
MEAN	2.04	1.45	1.74

[a]1 = $500 or more; 2 = $300-$499; 3 = $299 or less.

Table 5

PERCEIVED FINANCIAL STATUS[a]

	Alone	With Spouse	MEAN
Men	2.07	2.70	2.39
Women	2.27	2.26	2.26
MEAN	2.17	2.48	2.32

[a](How would you describe your present financial situation?) 1 = cannot make ends meet; 2 = enough to get by; 3 = comfortable; 4 = well to do; 5 = wealthy.

The pattern of results obtained for present monthly income closely parallels that obtained for occupational level. That is, there is a main effect for household size ($F = 13.61$, $p<.001$), with married individuals reporting higher income than single individuals. However, the sex-by-household interaction term is again significant ($F = 4.84$, $p<.03$); men with spouses have the highest incomes and men alone have the lowest, while differences among women are much smaller. In general, the alone status is financially worse for older men than for older women, a conclusion which emerges even more strongly from the analysis of perceived financial status. Here the sex-by-household interaction is highly significant ($F = 10.83$, $p<.002$). Despite slight differences

in actual monthly income there is no difference in perceived financial status among women whether still married or alone; but among men financial status is, and is perceived as, far worse if alone than if coupled.

Social-Situational Information

Examination of demographic information leads to the conclusion that the old and alone status is not uniformly adverse. While analyses of variance on the several dependent measures typically yielded main effects for household size indicating that still-married older adults are in a preferred position educationally, occupationally and financially, these results were conditioned by strong interaction effects. That is, among men those married fare far better than those alone; among women, in contrast, there is very little difference between women alone and their still married counterparts. Most notably, women alone seemed to be in a much better position than men alone relative to the demographic indices explored. It next seemed appropriate to investigate social and situational variables potentially implicated in the well being of older adults alone.

Because of the strong predictive relationship between self-rated health and physician-assessed health as well as morale (Campbell, Converse and Rodgers, 1967; Atchley, 1977), we asked subjects to describe their health in several ways. Tables 6 and 7 present subjects' responses to questions about level of health and health care.

Table 6

HEALTH[a]

	Alone	With Spouse	MEAN
Men	2.51	2.15	2.33
Women	2.24	2.28	2.26
MEAN	2.38	2.21	2.30

[a](How do you consider your present health?) 1 = excellent; 2 = good; 3 = fair; 4 = poor.

Table 7

HEALTH CARE[a]

	Alone	With Spouse	MEAN
Men	51%	82%	66%
Women	71%	82%	76%
MEAN	61%	82%	71%

[a](Do you regularly see a doctor?) Percent of positive responses.

As Table 6 shows, the majority of Young-Old subjects regard their condition favorably, 60 percent rating their health as either good or excellent. Further, perceived health is influenced by household ($F = 3.98$, $p<.05$), means obtained from married subjects reflecting better health ratings than those for single subjects. However, examining the cell means reveals that this effect holds only among men; among women there is no difference in ratings obtained from those with and without spouses. Data presented in Table 7 are perhaps suggestive of reasons for such an outcome. Married individuals see a doctor regularly, as do single women. But only about half of older men alone engage in such health practices. On the basis of these results we could not help speculating that within older married couples it is the women who take responsibility for regular health care.

A second group of social-situational variables we explored concerned subjects' eating practices. That is, we inquired about the conditions under which they shop for food and prepare and eat meals. Responses to questions about eating and meal preparation are presented in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 8

EATING[a]

	Alone	With Spouse	MEAN
Men	36%	87%	61%
Women	70%	86%	78%
MEAN	53%	86%	69%

[a](Do you usually eat at home?) Percent of positive responses.

Table 9

MEAL PREPARATION[a]

	Alone	With Spouse	MEAN
Men	39%	13%	26%
Women	75%	90%	82%
MEAN	57%	52%	54%

[a](Do you usually prepare your own meals?) Percent of positive responses.

The data in table 8 were evaluated by a Chi-squared test ($X^2 = 7.01$, $p<.01$) indicating that while married couples and single women typically eat at home, a disproportionately small number of single men eat at home. This finding also characterized responses from Old-Old men but not those from Young men. We suspected that changes in sex role socialization have better prepared younger men to handle eating-related tasks at home and also that eating may be a more central leisure activity and source of social contact for older than for younger people. The latter hypothesis gains support from the circumstance that 68 percent of younger single subjects but only 53 percent of older single subjects eat at home.

The socialization issue can be further explored in terms of re-

sponses to the meal preparation question (Table 9). A Chi-squared test again indicated significant differences among cells ($X^2 = 13.86$, $p<.001$). Married women virtually always prepare their own meals and married men virtually never, while among those alone most women and a few men prepare meals. The striking congruence in percentage of positive responses for men and women alone in Tables 8 and 9 suggests that older single men do not eat at home because they do not know how to prepare food for themselves; it is likely that for the duration of their married lives a spouse had responsibility for arranging meals. Evidence that sex role socialization is in fact changing comes from the Young single sample; within this group, 72 percent of women and 71 percent of men usually prepare their own meals.

Finally, after inquiring about specific difficulties related to choosing foods, we asked subjects about decisionmaking in general. Data for this last social-situational variable appear in Table 10.

Table 10

DECISIONS[a]

	Alone	With Spouse	MEAN
Men	24%	19%	22%
Women	24%	37%	30%
MEAN	24%	28%	26%

[a](Do you find that making decisions is harder for you now than it used to be?) Percent of positive responses.

Apparently making decisions is found to be most difficult by married women, who--we have supposed--are often the persons primarily responsible for instrumental activities in daily living. Married men, in contrast, experience least decisionmaking difficulty.

Self and Social Attitudes

As we noted in the account of procedures, subjects who completed

parts of the experimental booklet ahead of others had the option of responding to short sets of items in an additional booklet tapping a variety of self and social attitudes. About 78 percent of the older sample undertook some item sets, although only 20 completed the booklet. The subject subsample for any item set is therefore biased in a number of ways and we have not analysed their responses. However, because of their special relevance to the concerns of this paper, we have presented data from a small number of items for review here.

Several questions in the supplementary booklet inquired about subjects' social activities and about contacts with friends and relatives. Examining responses from single subjects, we learned that in their leisure time over two-thirds of the men pursue solitary activities while over two-thirds of the women engage in social activities. In addition, women who live alone have far more frequent contact with family members and friends than do single men. Responses to questions focused specifically at loneliness are given in Tables 11 and 12 (N= 80).

Table 11

LONELINESS[a]

	Alone	With Spouse	MEAN
Men	2.27	2.62	2.44
Women	2.56	2.71	2.64
MEAN	2.41	2.66	2.54

[a](How often do you feel lonely or remote from other people?) 1 = most of the time; 2 = sometimes; 3 = hardly ever.

Table 12

ALONENESS[a]

	Alone	With Spouse	MEAN
Men	2.31	2.75	2.53
Women	2.47	2.57	2.52
MEAN	2.39	2.66	2.52

[a](Does being alone make you feel lonely?) 1 = usually; 2 = sometimes; 3 = rarely.

As the means in Table 11 suggest, couples are probably less lonely than single older adults. However, within the alone group, men appear to be more lonely than women. It is possible that this result reflects the solitariness of the leisure pursuits of older men alone, which in turn may reflect their lack of experience in making social arrangements. The responses given in Table 12 may shed some light on this question, where means suggest that the situation of being alone is experienced differently by older adults depending on sex and household. Being alone is experienced as loneliness to a lesser degree by married men than by married women; on the other hand, this situation is experienced as more lonely by single men than by single women. This contrast gives rise to two speculations. First, it suggests that since single men experience being alone as a lonely situation, they probably pursue solitary leisure activities because they are not skilled in making social arrangements rather than because they do not prefer social contact. Second, it may be that single women experience this state as less lonely (and are more similar to their married counterparts) because they realize that social activities are within their range of accomplishment.

Last, we presented subjects with a standard Draw-a-Person task, followed on the succeeding page by instructions to draw an old person. While many subjects professed that they could not draw, 30 undertook these tasks; the figure on the first page of this paper represented

an old person to a 70 year old widower, while the figure below was the response of a widow of similar age. All figures were coded for occurrence of age indicators, for affective expression (smile, neutral, frown), for size and detail. Frequency of age indicators appears in Table 13.

Table 13

DRAW AN OLD PERSON

	Alone	With Spouse
Age Indicator	18	1
No Age Indicator	5	4

There were too few respondents to permit examining responses by sex; however, the majority of respondents were women. As is clear from Table 13, being alone versus being with a spouse is significantly related to appearance of age indicators in the draw-a-person task. The response distribution on this task suggests that for an older adult, being married has a positive influence on how aging is stereotyped.

CONCLUSION

It is a general assumption in our society that being young and being socially-emotionally involved in a satisfying network of relationships offers the best prescription for happy successful living. We are all urged to think and act young in order to "stay young" and we are absolutely implored to be sociable, keep in touch, avoid being--and especially living--alone. Recent changes in social-political views and the work of such advocacy groups as the Gray Panthers (Old is OK!), coupled with an awareness of the limited possibilities for preventing people from in fact becoming old, may signal a softening in our negative attitudes toward age per se; but the concern (indeed, distress) expressed about the single, the solitary, the alone persons in our midst--particularly if also aged--mounts as we note their increasing number and visibility.

In the course of our research, we have looked more closely at one sample of old-and-alone persons, and we have been forced to reexamine our admittedly unthinking assumptions about this life style for the older individual. Specifically, our data highlighted for us a generally unrecognized phenomenon, namely that being old and alone can have very different evaluative implications depending on the person's sex, or--more properly, we think--sex role training, expectations, and enactment. While singly each result is perhaps weak, put together the patterning is clear: Given minimal levels of health and financial resources, older women alone fare reasonably well, while older men alone experience considerable trouble coping with life demands, both instrumental and social.

The causes of this asymmetrical situation are open to speculation. The most obvious explanation, it seems to us, stems from traditional

socialization of male persons such that routine support activities of daily living are neither learned nor defined as appropriately to be learned, it being expected that these actions will be performed for the man by a woman (usually the spouse). The unprepared man asked then in his late years to assume these tasks for himself is understandably in trouble. For the still-married older woman too the situation has unfortunate consequences; she is expected to continue to handle increasingly complex physical and social needs of the couple by herself despite advancing age.

An intriguing implication of this state of affairs is the possible impact of androgenous socialization on the quality of life in later years. The prediction is clear: The more that daily living tasks (instrumental and social) are seen as equally the responsibility of both sexes, the better equipped individuals will be for old age whether time and chance leave them coupled or alone. Further research along these lines is needed to replace old myth and inform future policy.

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